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Caught by surprise: How covid summer is affecting the D.C. region

An increase in covid cases in the D.C. region has upended summer plans yet again, catching residents by surprise and sending them scrambling for at-home tests.

6 min

A sticker advocates masks and keeping a safe distance near Logan Circle in late May. (Pete Voelker for The Washington Post)

By Jenna Portnoy and Marissa J. Lang
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After four years coronavirus-free, one Arlington woman began to think she was immune.

An Annandale couple cautiously ditched their masks to see Three Dog Night perform live.

And a mother-daughter duo from D.C. didn't think twice about singing alongside thousands of fans at Taylor Swift's Eras Tour in Edinburgh.

But the virus came for them all amid a steady increase in cases that upended summer plans yet again, catching residents by surprise and sending them scrambling for once-ubiquitous — and free — at-home tests.

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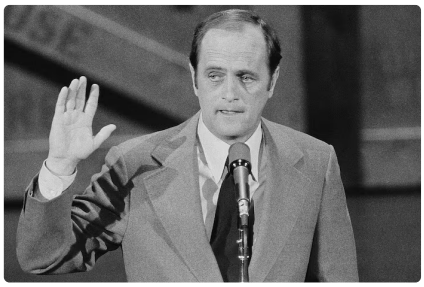

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(The Washington Post)

Experts say a predictable summertime surge was fueled by the combination of people retreating indoors as the capital region coped with its hottest temperatures in decades and traveling over school break as well as the proliferation of variants that evade immunity from vaccines and previous infection.

Although nothing like earlier spikes, cases are high enough to register concern, particularly in Maryland, one of six states with "very high" levels of covid in wastewater, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tracking map. Virginia is among more than a dozen states with "high" levels, and state public health officials say emergency department visits have been steadily increasing since early June. The CDC map did not have any data from the District.

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Elena Diskin, respiratory disease epidemiologist at the Virginia Department of Health, said that for the past few years, seasonal surges have occurred in midwinter with the peak around New Year's and in the summer.

"I just didn't anticipate getting it in the middle of summer," said Cindy Carlson, came down with covid alongside her husband, Bruce, after seeing Three Dog Night perform a sold-out show at the Birchmere in Alexandria.

At first, they thought Bruce Carlson's allergies were acting up. Then his symptoms worsened and his muscles ached from coughing. Cindy felt tired and had a fever of 103. Drugstores and supermarket shelves were cleaned out of tests, but they eventually saw the telltale double red lines that signal a positive result.

"This time, that second line was there right away," Cindy Carlson said. "There was no reason to wait the full 15

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Some communities, including Montgomery County, still make at-home tests available free at libraries while supplies last, but many find themselves racing to purchase the last boxes on pharmacy shelves.

CDC guidance treats covid like other common respiratory viruses, advising people who are sick to isolate until their symptoms improve or they have been fever-free for 24 hours. For the next five days, officials say to wear a mask, distance and test if you plan to be around others indoors, all of which CDC recommends whenever the coronavirus is circulating widely in the community.

Even Kisha Davis, the top public health official in Montgomery County, said she knows cases are up when neighbors, fellow churchgoers and even President Biden test positive.

"The president getting covid is a reminder that covid is still here," she said. "It's probably going to be with us forever at this point."

Davis said that while the current variants don't seem to be causing severe illness, more people are reporting gastrointestinal symptoms in addition to the fever, sore throat, cough, aches and headache that can be the hallmarks of covid.

"Whether it's a covid or the flu or RSV, stay home until you're better and that really helps everybody," she said.

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Cheryl Feik Ryan, 62, is rethinking how she'll approach large events and travel in the future after contracting covid following a trip in June to see Taylor Swift. She isolated in her Wesley Heights home while sick and had to skip a trip to see her 92-year-old mother in Houston.

Nearly a month later, she's still coughing.

"You know how during the pandemic you'd wear a mask in the airplane or at the airport and you'd think: 'What a great idea for preventing all kinds of infection!' But, of course, the world returned to seemingly normal and nobody's been wearing a mask," she said. "I'm thinking about it now, especially in these big crowds."

A sign on a door at the Carmel Plaza Apartments in the District in late May informs guests that they must wear a mask when entering the leasing office. (Pete Voelker for The Washington Post)

Amesh Adalja, an infectious-disease specialist and senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, has noticed an uptick in patients reporting covid-like symptoms and has heard about more cases among his friends — none of which should come as a shock, he said.

"They asked us last summer if it surprised us and I said no. They asked us the summer before if it surprised us and I said no," he said.

Even though cases are up, Adalja said it should reassure people that there are more tools to prevent, treat and manage covid than any other respiratory virus, including wastewater monitoring, vaccines and the antiviral drug Paxlovid.

"You have to recognize this is an endemic respiratory virus," he said. "It's impossible to completely avoid."

As a politician, Montgomery County Council member Dawn Luedtke, of Ashton, shakes a lot of hands and keeps hand sanitizer at the ready. The virus still "snuck up on" her and her 16-year-old stepson, who at first assumed yard work had triggered allergies.

"The level of heat and other things … make you a little less suspicious that it's covid. In the winter, you're more likely to think it could be covid," she said.

Luedtke, who has an autoimmune disorder, usually does not wear a mask, she said, "but knowing that there's a wave of this very active in the community now, I'm more interested in wearing a mask in indoor congregant spaces."

Cheryl Coogan, 65, of Arlington, has masked on planes and public transit, avoided crowds and rarely dined indoors at restaurants for the last four years — even as she began to suspect she might be immune to the coronavirus after several exposures and zero infections.

But last month, she said, her run of good luck came to an end. When she started coughing overnight, the oximeter her daughter bought during the peak of the pandemic showed her levels were dropping. Her fever climbed to 102.7 degrees.

"I'm a tough old bird and I don't scare easy," Coogan said. "But this scared me."

Nearly three weeks after initially testing positive, she is still congested, sneezing and coughing.

"We were being pretty careful, really," she said. "But it seems there's no way to avoid it now."

Kyle Swenson contributed to this report.

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By Jenna Portnoy

Jenna Portnoy is the local health reporter for The Washington Post. She previously covered members of Congress from the greater Washington region and worked in the Richmond bureau. Before joining The Post, she worked for the Newark Star-Ledger in her home state, as well as the Allentown Morning Call and Philadelphia City Paper. Twitter

By Marissa Lang

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